Michiel de Vaan (ed.)

Germanic Tone Accents

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In June 2003, a conference organized by Michiel de Vaan and featuring a total of 17 presentations about Germanic tone accents was held at the University of Leiden. The fact that internationally renowned academics gathered for such a conference and that 10 of the papers presented have now been published in revised and expanded form in the work reviewed here indicates the growing significance of tone accent studies within linguistics. In their contribution, Jürgen E. Schmidt and Hermann J. Künzel (p. 135; my translation) characterize this status as follows: ‘Tone accent research has attained a significance for general linguistic debates which can only be compared with the first decade of the twentieth century. It has particular relevance in the context of phonological theory and linguistic typology.’ This ‘Renaissance’ (p. 135) was largely unforeseeable, at least for the German tone accents, which are addressed in contributions by Anna Peetz (on Beuren), Jörg Peters (on Cologne), and Jürgen E. Schmidt and Hermann J. Künzel (on Mayen and Morbach). Indeed, the key issues raised by the topic were long considered to have been adequately addressed in the postdoctoral theses of Theodor Frings [1916] and Georg Heike [1964]. The contents of this volume, however, characteristically reveal that the investigation of Germanic tone accents has opened up a broad spectrum of endeavour, and that the first steps towards a renewed scientific engagement have been taken. Simplifying drastically, three overarching research questions can be formulated: (1) On what phonetic/phonological correlates do tone accents currently rest? (2) How did the Germanic tone accents emerge historically? (3) What does the spatial variation of tone accents look like?

In the subfield of Middle Franconian tone accent research, the contributions by Peters and Schmidt and Künzel represent the currently competing phonological approaches: an autosegmental

versus a moraic account of tone accents (p. 135). It is presumably the authors’ phonetic findings which are of most interest to readers here. In his paper, Peters reanalyses the ‘Cologne sharpening’ (*Kölner Schärfung*) originally investigated by Heike [1962, 1964]. As in Gussenhoven and Peters [2004], this author investigates tone accent minimal pairs in various syntactic and prosodic contexts and reaches the conclusion (using HL-phonological descriptions) that it is tonality – or, more precisely, the presence or absence of a lexical tone on the second mora – which evokes the tone accent distinction in all prosodic and syntactic contexts, and that duration and intensity function solely as ‘enhancing characters’ (p. 131). A puzzling fact needs to be pointed out here: Peters’ findings regarding the F_0 contours for tone accent 2 in declarative sentences do not match those presented by Garza [1992] in her study of Cologne tone accents. While Peters (p. 125) differentiates tone accents 1 and 2 in this context with reference to the steepness (in final position) and the absolute value of the drop (in non-final position) in F_0 , according to Garza [1992, esp. p. 50] – and in line with observations in Mayen (cf. Schmidt and Künzel) [Werth, in press] – tone accent 2 displays a marked final upward movement in the F_0 contour.

In their contribution, Schmidt and Künzel present a comprehensive theory of origin which integrates phonetically/phonologically diverse language regions. They begin with a contrastive, acoustical analysis of the tone accents in two Middle Franconian locations for which they assume a contrasting tone accent distribution – Rule A in Mayen, on the basis of earlier investigations by Schmidt [1986], and Rule B in Morbach, based on the unpublished studies of Guido Reitz [cf. Schmidt, 1986, p. 240]. Their measurements reveal significant differences between tone accents 1 and 2 in the duration and the fundamental frequency contour in both Mayen and Morbach, as well as phonetic differences between the two locations. Whilst the difference in duration between the two tone accents is demonstrably larger in Morbach, their data reveal identical final falling F_0 contours for tone accent 1 and largely divergent contours for tone accent 2 in the two towns: two F_0 maximums in Rule A territory, flat or gently rising in Rule B. On the basis of

these results and Schmidt [2002], Schmidt and Künzel posit a theory of origin for the rule reversal, which attempts to explain the ‘wrong’ (i.e., the reversed, relative to Rule A) correlation between phonological units and vocabulary ‘as part of a (differentiated) overarching historical process’ (p. 153–154; my translation).

The contributions by José Cajot, Jan Goossens, Ronny Keulen, Anatoly Liberman, and Harry Perridon all also address the problem of the origin of the Germanic tone accent, at least in part. The varying methods with which these authors approach the issue and the disparate results and explanatory ambits demonstrate that the field is still a long way from a theory of origins capable of explaining the undeniable variation in the tone accent areas as a whole. Whereas Cajot uses survey techniques and analyses of statistical frequency relative to space to posit a loss of polytony in Limburgish south of Maastricht, classifying this as ‘structurally determined’ (p. 22), Keulen discusses qualitative und quantitative developments of the vowel system for precisely this ‘toneless enclave’ (p. 51) which he sees as inevitably leading to a neutralization of the tone accent opposition. In his contribution on the tone accents in the Limburgish town of Genk, Goossens draws on the Middle High German vowel system to reconstruct a possible tone accent opposition in the ‘short vowel preceding obstruent’ context, the continuing development of which has led to a current lack of phonological tone distinction (p. 37). Finally, Harry Perridon engages with the Scandinavian sprachraum, establishing a chronology for the origin of the Germanic tone accents, the most surprising element of which is the simultaneous and hence independent emergence of the Norwegian and the Swedish tone accents (or Danish *stød*). The Scandinavian tone accents are also the focus of Inger Eskjaer’s paper on the distinguishing function of the glottal stop in Danish dialects, and Gjert Kristoffersen’s HL-phonological analyses of tone accent 2 in Norwegian Bergen. In implicit contradiction to Perridon’s genesis theory, Anatoly Liberman traces distinctive prosodemes in all the Germanic language areas back to a common Old Germanic accent system.

It becomes clear from the contents of the proceedings volume under review that not only are answers to existing lines of inquiry being attempted – a number of fresh questions are also being raised.¹ This should not be understood as a

criticism, but rather a reflection of the fact that the object of study is a complex phonetic/phonological phenomenon, the investigation of which, despite all efforts to date, is still in its early stages. Hence, none of the three research questions described above can be considered as completely answered: (1) Because there is still no generally (internationally) accepted descriptive basis for prosodic features, the phonetic and phonological correlates of the tone accents are yet to be definitively established. (2) Without the former, any account of the origin of a tone accent is inevitably speculative. (3) An exploration of the areal variation in tone accents is expanded by Cajot’s contribution on Limburgish in particular. But greater advances in this regard must wait on tone accent atlases which map the phonetic and phonological variation in space using comparable methods (i.e., identical measurement and descriptive instruments).

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A. Werth
Marburg

¹Examples include issues already mentioned, such as that of whether short vowels which precede obstruents can carry tone accents (Goossens) or how to account for the apparent variation in tone accent 2 between Cologne and Mayen (Peters; Schmidt and Künzel).